From Babylon to Bodrum in Three Recitals

by

John D. Etsell

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Martin Katz, Chair
Lecturer Amy I-Lin Cheng
Associate Professor Gabriela Cruz
Associate Professor Gottfried Hagen
Associate Professor René Rusch

John D. Etsell

jetsell@umich.edu

ORCID id: 0000-0002-9129-9380

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ABSTRACT

Three collaborative piano recitals were performed in lieu of a written dissertation. The music on each of these recitals was planned to be thematically cohesive. The unifying concept of the first recital was the idea of decadence in art song. The poetry and music presented show the connections between Charles Baudelaire and the "symbolist" school of poetry, as well as the Wagenrian influence on Schönberg and Debussy. The second recital, "Homage to Langston Hughes," contained settings of Langston Hughes' poetry by American composers. Robert Owens, Margaret Bonds, John Musto, and Ricky Ian Gordon all set Hughes' poetry to music in their own unique styles. This musical panoply was intended to celebrate the important and multi-faceted legacy of one of America's greatest poets. The final concert, entitled "Lecture Recital: Fazil Say," was a combined presentation and performance featuring two concurrently composed sonatas by Fazil Say. Each movement in these sonatas is based on a different city in Turkey. Performing these works while also giving background on Say's life and influences allowed for an exploration of the possibility and problematics of cross-cultural connection through music in the 21st century.

Sunday, October 4, 2020, 1:00pm; The First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor. Daniel McGrew, tenor; Nathaniel Pierce, tenor. Hans Werner Henze *Three Auden Songs*; Claude Debussy *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire*; Arnold Schönberg *15 Gedichte aus "Das Buch der hängenden Gärten" von Stefan George*, op.15.

Sunday, February 28, 2021, 4:00pm; The First Congregational Church of Ann Arbor. Albert R. Lee, tenor. Robert Owens *Silver Rain*, op.11. Margaret Bonds *Three Dream Portraits* and "Troubled Water"; John Musto *Shadow of the Blues*; Ricky Ian Gordon "Harlem Night Song," "Dream," "Delinquent," "Dream Variations," "Daybreak in Alabama," "In Time of Silver Rain," "When Sue Wears Red," "Stars" from *Only Heaven*;

Saturday, March 21, 2021, 8:00pm; Walgreen Drama Center, Stamps Auditorium, the University of Michigan. Dakota Cotugno, cello; Elisha Willinger, clarinet; Fazil Say *Four Cities: Sonata for Cello and Piano*, op.41, *Sonata for Clarinet in B-flat and Piano*, op.42.

RECITAL 1 PROGRAM

Daniel McGrew & Nathaniel Pierce, tenors

Sunday, October 4, 2020
The First Congregational church of Ann Arbor
1:00 pm

Three Auden Songs (1983) — Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012)

In memoriam L.K.A. (1950-1952)
Rimbaud
Lay your sleeping head, my love

Daniel McGrew, tenor

Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire (1887-1889) — Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Le balcon
Harmonie du soir
Le jet d'eau
Recueillement
La mort des amants

Daniel McGrew, tenor

15 Gedichte aus "Das Buch der hängenden Gärten" von Stefan George, op.15 (1907-1909) Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951)

Unterm Schutz von dichten Blättergründen
Hain in diesen Paradiesen
Als Neuling trat ich ein in dein Gehege
Da meine Lippen reglos sind und brennen
Saget mir auf welchem Pfade
Jedem Werke bin ich fürder tot
Angst und Hoffen wechselnd sich beklemmen
Wenn ich heut nicht deinen Leib berühre
Streng ist uns das Glück und spröde
Das schöne Beet betracht ich mir im Harren
Als wir hinter dem beblümten Tore
Wenn sich bei Heilger Ruh in tiefen Matten
Du lehnest wider eine Silberweide
Sprich nicht mehr von dem Laub
Wir bevölkerten die abend-düstern Lauben

Nathaniel Pierce, tenor

RECITAL 1 PROGRAM NOTES

I

Hans Werner Henze (1926-2012) composed the seldom heard *Three Auden Songs* (1983) a few years before he returned to primarily setting texts written in his native German. The soundscape of these unusual songs is eclectic, ranging from austere to dreamy to dizzyingly fervent, reflecting the rarified and complicated nature of the poetry. Understanding W.H. Auden's (1907-1973) poems on their own without the addition of music is already no easy task, but there is a sense in which one is glad for the musical tapestry upon which Henze embroiders his interpretations. The abstract imagery and fragmented narrative style of these three particular poems is made palpable by the composer's flexible yet specific musical imagination. Each song is self-contained and markedly different from the others.

"In memoriam, L.K.A. (1950-1952)" is short and pointed, the piano part a paragon of pristine clarity. It begins with a two-part invention followed by a simple, lilting waltz. The voice part floats along reflectively (sometimes in a notated falsetto) throughout this elegy to Lucina, "Blue-eyed queen of white cats," apparently only two years old at the time of her death.

The subject matter of "Rimbaud" concerns, as one might expect, the life of French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), and includes references to his brief, troubled relationship with fellow French poet Paul Verlaine (1844-1896). The music in this song is chaotic and mercurial throughout, setting the stage for the otherworldly eeriness of the final song, "Lay your sleeping head, my love," which explores the emotionally dissonant nature of an illicit love affair.

After many pages of harmonic ambiguity, sometimes overtly atonal and sometimes impressionistically focused on a particular mode or scale, the final bar of the third song comes to rest on an open fifth, as if to restore order via reference to the foundation of the harmonic universe. The rawness of the naked fifth, at once stable and harsh, underscores a feeling that the human dramas of love, life, and death— myriad as they are—can be reduced to something fundamental, but mysteriously inexplicable.

II

Compared to the majority of Claude Debussy's *mélodies*, the *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire* (1887-1889) are exceptional in several respects. Aside from the third song, "Le jet d'eau," whose refrain wouldn't sound too out of place in a

jazz standard, these works are among Debussy's most challenging to grasp. Their extremely dense piano parts (which were later orchestrated) provide a rich foliage out of which the voice part grows like a twisting vine. This is a salient characteristic of Richard Wagner's (1813-1883) music dramas, by which Debussy was tremendously influenced, even if he tried to disavow this fact.

These songs are largely through-composed, and despite their length and constantly morphing themes, they do show careful organization and formal planning. For example, Debussy makes use of Baudelaire's (1821-1867) repetitive poetic structures to create cohesion in the first two songs. In "Le balcon," the first and last line of each stanza are the same, and "Harmonie du soir" features a similar idea. Debussy sets these lines in musically analogous ways, a technique derived from Wagner's use of leitmotivs. As noted above, the third song, "Le jet d'eau," features a refrain (the repetition created by Debussy, not Baudelaire), making it the most conventional of the five.

It is also the most musically forward-looking with respect to Debussy's later songs. The listener will recognize several hallmarks of the "impressionistic" style, such as long periods of harmonic stasis, and the use of harp-like arpeggios to represent glistening water. "Recuillement" and "La mort des amants" are among the shortest in this set, and, compared to the first two songs, it is relatively easy to hear their distinct musical sections.

The subject matter of the Baudelaire songs bears a resemblance to the themes present in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), namely memory, love, intoxication, sensuality, and death. Certainly no explicit narrative arc exists across all five songs, but there is a general feeling of movement from the memory of a great past love in "Le balcon" to the imagined meeting of two spirits saying goodbye amidst love-reviving angels in "La mort des amants". These two songs are united by the prominent imagery of nightfall as well. "Le balcon" repeatedly recalls "evenings illuminated by the burning of the coal" and the beauty of "the suns on warm evenings" when two lovers were together, while "La mort des amants" imagines an "evening made of rose and mystical blue" when two lovers will say a final goodbye.

Throughout all five songs, Debussy often returns to the key of C Major, the key of origins, of natural harmony without sharps or flats. This adds another layer of meaning and cohesiveness to this grand song set. The vast psychic realm and grand vision of these songs was, however, ultimately unsustainable within the

genre of the *mélodie*, making understandable Debussy's eventual shift in this genre to much smaller-scale forms. Where else could he have gone in this vein? In a sense, the Baudelaire songs mark the end of a compositional era for Debussy, although it could be argued that he never did fully exorcise the Wagnerian specter.

III

Arnold Schönberg's (1874-1951) fifteen songs on poetry from Stefan George's 1895 collection *The Book of Hanging Gardens,* composed from 1907-1909, comprise his only unified song cycle in the tradition of the German *liederkreis.* George's *Hanging Gardens* is part of a three book collection titled *Die Bücher der Hirten-und Preisgedichte, der Sagen und Sänge, und der Hängenden Gärten* (The Books of Eclogues and Eulogies, of Legends and Lays, and the Hanging Gardens). George wrote that "they mirror a soul which has temporarily taken refuge in other eras and regions." The hanging gardens refer to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the so-called Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, but the poems are not merely the product of late nineteenth-century European exoticism. They have a "symbolic although clearly autobiographical narrative concerning [George's] own adolescence and the difficulties that he had experienced in establishing his place as an artist in a materialistic society." Schönberg chose to set only half of the 31 poems in this collection, forming a loose narrative arc of his own making. The cycle begins with the adolescent prince's description of the gardens, turning in the the third song to his sexual interest in a woman who remains always (in true misogynistic fashion) distant and without voice or volition. The final four songs chart the end of the affair, and the eventual withering of the gardens themselves.

Schönberg composed *The Book of Hanging Gardens* during what is commonly called his "free atonality"period. He composed consistently in this unsystematic manner from 1907 until the early 1920's, when he discovered the twelve-tone method. Having broken free from the constraints of tonality at the end of his Second String Quartet, Schönberg was writing music that was truly radical. His innovations were, of course, disdained by the public and written off as nonsense. Many audiences have the same reaction to Schönberg today. There is something fundamentally unsettling about music that lacks a home key, a center of gravity.

Much has been written about this iconoclastic song cycle. The dissolution of the garden has been commonly interpreted as a broad metaphor for the death of tonality, as well as a symbol for the end of the love affair between the narrator and the unnamed woman. Stefan George was in fact associated with the literary movement known as symbolism, as were Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud. These fifteen poems show the symbolist's focus on imagery and poetic suggestion over traditional form and true-to-life "naturalism." They are fantastical, sexual, and sometimes even surreal (especially No.15, with its reference to "unseen hands").

One final aspect of Schönberg is worth discussing here, and that is his obsession with a kind of pseudo-mathematical divinatory practice known as numerology. Numerology uses a repeating structure called the Pythagorean Alphabet that assigns number values to letters. According to Colin C. Sterne, Schönberg utilized numerology in some way shape or form in every one of his compositions with an opus number. Schönberg's obsession ran deep, especially concerning his unlucky number (13) and the number he associated with himself as a creative artist (21). In *The Book of Hanging Gardens*, we find a very subtle instance of 21 concerning the note B-flat, which is a fairly prominent note throughout the cycle. Songs number 6 and 15 (6+15=21) both end on B-flat in the piano part. In addition to the final B-Flat in song number fifteen, the first song in the cycle ends with the sound of an F-Dominant 7th sonority. Schönberg enjoys a bit of irony here; his great atonal song cycle is one giant authentic cadence.

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RECITAL 2 PROGRAM

Albert R. Lee, tenor

Sunday, February 28, 2021
The First Congregational church of Ann Arbor
4:00 pm

HOMAGE TO LANGSTON HUGHES

Silver Rain, op.11 (1958) — Robert Owens (1925-2017)

In Time of Silver Rain
Fulfillment
Night Song
Silence
Carolina Cabin
Songs
Sleep

Three Dream Portraits (1958) — Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)

Minstrel Man
Dream Variations
I, too

From ***Spiritual Suite for Piano*** (1952) — Margaret Bonds

Troubled Water

Shadow of the Blues (1987) — John Musto (b.1954)

Silhouette
Litany
Island
Could Be

From *Only Heaven* (1995) — Ricky Ian Gordon (b.1956)

Harlem Night Song
Dream
Delinquent
Dream Variations
Daybreak in Alabama
In Time of Silver Rain
When Sue Wears Red
Stars

RECITAL 2 PROGRAM NOTES

I

James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) surely numbers among those celebrated in the pantheon of immortal American authors. With a masterful style that couples deft insight and knife-sharp clarity, Hughes wrote novels, short story collections, children's books, books on Black history and jazz, two autobiographies, two opera libretti, and—most famously—sixteen volumes of poetry. Hughes is perhaps the most well-known writer associated with the artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance (c.1918-1937) that aimed to chronicle and celebrate the experiences and identities of Black people in an authentic manner cleansed of pernicious white stereotypes and Victorian mores.

After growing up in various cities in Kansas and going to high school in Cleveland, Ohio, Hughes moved to New York to attend Columbia University following a prolonged conflict with his father (who chose to live in the less racially fraught country of Mexico) over his future. Being a relatively light-skinned black man often led to Hughes being ostracized by both Black and White Americans. Struggling to find consistent work in Harlem, where he moved after dropping out of Columbia, Hughes eventually took to the sea for six months as a steward on the *S.S. Malone*. The ship was bound for Africa and Western Europe. In his first autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), he recounts a kind of ritual cleansing of his past in which he threw all the books in his luggage overboard. He also remembers the dreamlike excitement of leaning over the deck rail for a first glance at the majestic African coast.

After this trip, which even included a short stint as a cook in Paris, Hughes moved to Washington D.C. His writing career began to take off when the poet Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931)—whose table Hughes was bussing in a restaurant—recommended his poetry to Alfred A. Knopf. They published his first collection, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. Blues stanza form and vernacular language, two hallmarks of Hughes' style, were already in place, utilized with tremendous force and economy of expression. He eventually attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania on scholarship, receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree before moving to New York.

Although centered in New York for the rest of his life, Hughes traveled widely. He founded theaters in Harlem, Chicago, and Los Angeles, and covered

the Spanish Civil War as a correspondent for the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper. He also had a teaching career working as a visiting professor at Atlanta University and a visiting lecturer at the University of Chicago. It should be noted that Hughes had facility in several languages other than English. He learned French in high school, a fair amount of German while living with his father—who was fascinated by the culture and had a German housekeeper—and Spanish, which he was also first exposed to while in Mexico.

He eventually translated poetry by Federico García Lorca and Gabriela Mistral. In the 1930's, Hughes visited the Soviet Union along with twenty-one young African- Americans as part of the cast for a Soviet film about racism in America, entitled *Black and White.* The Soviet efforts at anti-racism were, unfortunately, rooted in stereotypical depictions of Black people and riddled with the White savior cliché. During this time, Hughes admired certain ideals of communism, but was allergic to its stiff dogmatism. Later, in Red Scare America, perceived communist influences in his writing were considered suspicious, and he was called to testify in front of Joseph McCarthy's Subcommittee on Investigations. Although he denied being a communist, Hughes' work certainly expresses a strong solidarity with the working class.

Hughes received many honors and awards over the course of his life, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, Rosenwald Fellowship, an honorary doctorate from Lincoln University, and induction into the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He has been widely influential in music, literature, and art, and his work is more relevant today than ever. But despite his tremendous success and status as one of the pre-eminent Black voices of his time, he remained quite humble. As playwright Loften Mitchell noted,

> Langston set a tone, a standard of brotherhood and friendship and cooperation, for all of us to follow. You never got from him, 'I am the Negro writer,' but only 'I am a Negro writer.' He never stopped thinking about the rest of us."

II

All of the songs on this program are written by American composers and set to Hughes' poetry. Two of the composers—Robert Owens (1925-2017) and Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)— knew the poet personally.

Owens spent much of his working life in Germany, where racial segregation was not so much of an issue, but he did teach briefly at Albany College in Georgia and the University of Michigan. He met Hughes in 1955, and corresponded with him regularly for a few years. Hughes greatly admired Owens' settings of his poetry, which number forty-six in all. The seven songs in *Silver Rain* (1958) are aphoristic and light in texture. The longest song in the cycle is a mere two-and-a-half minutes long, while the shortest takes up only two lines of staff paper. Owens was a child prodigy pianist who started playing public concerts at age ten and studied in France with the famous pianist Alfred Cortot (1877-1962). The piano parts of these songs lie wonderfully under the fingers, providing a full, yet transparent tapestry over which the words stand out like sparkling diamonds. Owens doesn't set any particularly biting poems in this cycle, choosing instead to highlight Hughes' softer, lyrical side. His settings, however, are anything but straightforward. Take, for example, the second song in the cycle, "Fulfillment". Here, with a tragic B-minor tonality, Owens transforms what appears on the surface to be a poem about a happy memory of a beautiful day into a dark commentary on the fleeting nature of youth and the passing indifference of time.

Margaret Bonds had an especially close working relationship with Hughes, corresponding and working on projects with him regularly until his death, which had a profound effect on her. She shared his deep commitment to advocating for the voices of Black people, and continued to promote his work in the five years by which she survived him. Bonds first discovered Hughes' work in the basement of Northwestern University's library. The first thing she read was "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," an early and well-known poem Hughes wrote in a flash of inspiration while on a train overlooking the Mississippi river. It became a source of strength for her amid the horrendous discrimination she was facing as one of the very few students of color in the university. She first met Hughes in person in 1939, after moving to Harlem to study at the Juilliard School.

Bonds' *Dream Portraits* (1958) are among her most frequently performed vocal works. The first song, "Minstrel Man," is narrated by a Black entertainer who is forced to sing and dance for whites. He speaks of the agony of faking joy while feeling completely used and invisible. Bonds' plaintive music, set in a dance-like 3/4 but weighed down by falling minor key melodies, projects the inner monologue of the narrator. The song's climax occurs on the words "You do not

know I die," and is underscored with lush, subtly dissonant piano writing that swells in tandem with the heightened emotionality of the words. "Dream Variation" provides relief from the dark atmosphere of "Minstrel Man," and features floating, bell-like fourths throughout. "I, too", one of Hughes' most important poems, is a kind of anthem for Black voices in white America. "I, too, sing America," the narrator says. "I am the darker brother." Bonds is sensitive to the anthem-like quality of the poem, writing music that sounds squarely grounded and defiant. The steely, minor key mood melts into warm, major key diatonicism only with the last line, when the narrator says, "Besides, they'll see how beautiful I am/ and be ashamed." At the end of the song, the prelude returns as a postlude, a reminder that Black voices will not be silenced.

"Troubled Water" is a solo piano piece Bonds wrote in the 1950's as part of a three piece set called *Spiritual Suite*, which also includes "Valley of the Bones" and "The Bells". First published in 1967, "Troubled Water" is Bonds' most enduring keyboard work, one she liked so much that she decided to orchestrate it. Based on the African-American spiritual "Wade in the Water," "Troubled Water" is a fantasy in E minor replete with chromatic jazz harmony as well as the open sounds of fourths and fifths. Bonds showcases her creativity and virtuosity as both composer and pianist in this work. The words of "Wade in the Water" were once used by abolitionist Harriet Tubman (1822-1913) as a coded instruction to slaves escaping north from southern plantations.

Walking in shallow river beds helped the slaves avoid detection by bloodhounds following their scent. Bonds' writing reflects the restless anxiety of those on the run, as well as a few moments of hopeful lyrical beauty.

John Musto's (b.1954) *Shadow of the Blues* (1987) draws on four Hughes poems all very different in tone. "Silhouette" is a shocking poem addressed to an anonymous "Southern gentle lady" imploring her not to swoon at the hanging of a Black man. Here, Hughes shows his utter mastery of linguistic expression. Consider how much more biting his phrase "Southern gentle lady" sounds than "Gentle southern lady" would have. The normal English syntax is reversed, making the adjective stand out. A southern *gentle* lady (a strange, unheard of counterpart to "gentleman") becomes a kind of monster in this poem, representing fake, condescending gentility and moral evil. Musto sets this line ingeniously with a breezy sighing motive that is punctuated with menacingly offbeat accents like an

awkward curtsey. The opening texture begins to devolve into chaos on the lines "They've hung a black man/ To a roadside tree in the dark of the moon," before suddenly shifting to a quotation from the Confederate song "I Wish I Was in Dixie Land" that ironically underscores Hughes' line "for the world to see how Dixie protects its white womanhood."“Litany," the second song of the set, should surely be counted as one of the great English language songs of the 20th century. Musto's music and Hughes' words seem utterly inextricable in this prayer for the relief of injustice and suffering. This poem acquired an even more poignant meaning amidst the turmoil of the HIV/AIDS epidemic which was in full force during the time Musto composed his setting.

"Island," the third song, is a symbolic mirage of a place free from pain and suffering. The narrator addresses a "Wave of sorrow," imploring it to deliver him to this blissful island rather than drown him. "Take me there, take me there," sounds the chant. Musto borrowed a motive from one of his piano concertos for this song, which consists entirely of running sixteenth notes in the piano part. This flurry of notes conjures a blurry image whose edges (or bar lines) we cannot see or hear completely clearly.

"Could Be," the final song of the set, is the only number in *Shadow of the Blues* that is actually reminiscent of blues music. Musto writes a triplet-based shuffle rhythm for this song sung by a heartbroken narrator who is beaten down to the point of numb depression. Anywhere he goes in the world is weary since he lost his lover who pawned his watch, ultimately settling for some fast cash over his affections. All of the locations mentioned in this poem—Hastings Street (Detroit) , Lennox Avenue (Harlem), and 18th and Vine (Kansas City)—are associated with jazz culture in the 1930's.

Ricky Ian Gordon (b. 1956) has several collections of songs featuring poetry by Hughes. The songs on this program are all taken from the collection *Only Heaven* (1995), a work originally conceived as an evening length musical revue with a storyline created by selectively linking roughly thirty of Hughes' poems. Gordon condensed this original show, which featured a small instrumental combo in addition to piano, into a seventeen song folio for voice and piano. Gordon's style is an amalgamation of musical theatre, cabaret, jazz, and European classical. His Hughes settings tend to have a feeling of spaciousness and flexibility, but are paradoxically almost always underscored with strong rhythmic figures. The

Afro-Cuban rumba rhythm seems to be one of his favorites, appearing in many songs in this collection, including “Harlem Night Song,” “Dream,” and “Dream Variations”. The Gordon selections on this program vary widely in tone, from the beautiful vision of racial harmony in “Daybreak in Alabama” to the darkly realistic “Delinquent,” which laments society’s tendency to judge people who need help rather than help them. “When Sue Wears Red" is a delightful short song on a poem Hughes wrote about a girl he went to high school with in Cleveland named Susanna Jones, whose beauty and confidence inspired him to write a poem about her. It is one of his earliest poetic efforts, and as such it is remarkably successful. Two of the songs included here are also set by Owens and Bonds. Gordon’s settings couldn’t be more different than those of his colleagues. One gets a fresh vision of Hughes’ words with each song.

“Stars” might be the most moving song in *Only Heaven*. Gordon wrote it for his partner Jeffrey Grossi who was dying of AIDS. “He needed enormous strength and support and I suppose I wrote this song to give it to him,” Gordon said. “Stars” is an invocation of hope and inspiration; “Reach out your hand, dark boy, and take a star,” Hughes writes. Gordon paints this celestial night time scene with a piano prelude reminiscent of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s (1873-1943) infamous “Vocalise”. This is the only song presented here in which Gordon instructs the singer to vocalize without words, exploring a mode of pure expression beyond the lexical.

III

Langston Hughes’ deep, often understated power of poetic utterance is illuminated by the diverse musical settings of his work by Owens, Bonds, Musto, and Gordon. His achievements as a Black, gay man living in the racially and morally repressive early to mid 20th-century United States stand as a monument to human perseverance, imagination, and integrity. Let us hope for many more musical settings of his poetry in the future.

RECITAL 3 PROGRAM

Dakota Cotugno, cello
Elisha Willinger, clarinet

Saturday, March 20,2021
Walgreen Drama Center, Stamps Auditorium
8:00pm

LECTURE RECITAL: FAZIL SAY

Four Cities: Sonata for Cello and Piano, op.41 (2012) — Fazil Say (b. 1970)

Sivas
Hopa
Ankara
Bodrum

Dakota Cotugno, cello

Sonata for Clarinet in B-flat and Piano, op.42 (2012) — Fazil Say

Pamukkale
Istanbul Nocturne
Cappadocia

Elisha Willinger, clarinet